

The Unknown Territory

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Abstract

Two years ago, at the beginning of my MFA program, I started to question my identity. Moving to a new place and land directed me into a more fundamental and vital understanding of myself and my place on earth. Because the move led me to look at my art from a different perspective, I realized that my work was becoming spatially responsive to what I was searching for in myself. Realistic self-portraits are dissolving into surreal and abstract backgrounds, which create a polar opposition between abstraction and figuration. My forms and brush marks are evolving to incorporate an abstract language where ideas and objects make a playful, arbitrary relationship to break their two-dimensional painting convention, and where the subject matter could be a reason for the colors and forms to live in a spontaneous coexistence. This existence reflects a dissolution and fragility of my ties to collective people and places. My aesthetics harness the meditative, and revolve around a sense of simultaneous awakening and entering deeper into a dream for the purpose of cultivating, evoking, experiencing, remembering, transforming, and communicating beauty. This process feeds back into my identity and the perception of the people and life that surrounds me.

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Introduction

“Being” is a self-evidence notion. Through memory, knowing and predicting we find our relation to oneself. It is astounding that the person, who is the instigator, the inventor, and the vehicle of all these developments, knows how to distinguish himself or herself from the other animals from physical and psychological points of view, but, as a conscious, reflecting being, who is capable of intelligent speech, has a contradictory self-knowledge.¹

Self-knowledge is a precious gift of the individual’s willingness to fulfill the demands of authentic self-examination.

As the core objective of my artistic quest, my studio work engages with notions of the psyche, consciousness, and self-awareness. Indeed, these three are the main components of my subject matter and research area in my paintings. Together they’re infused with a hidden language that could only be communicated through a creative art process. For me the quest of self-discovery is a creative endeavour that could be best served by self-transformation. I become aware that an act of artistic creativity can serve and illustrate many psychological needs: the creation of a self; the establishment of connections with the world; affect regulation; the working through conflict; myth and meaning making; and symbolic search for immortality. By investigating a dialogue between my personal identity and my collective, social reality, my goal is to create paintings that serve as independent narratives throughout their two-dimensional painting conventions. In my paintings, figures defragment and lose their corporality while abstraction distorts their reality.

Place, space, and identity were the subject matters that I was searching for and consuming since moving from my homeland to North America. My identity crisis became entangled with anxiety, alienation, and loss of belonging, as the new land was no longer my familiar concept of a place that I know. This replacement—or displacement—transformed my way of thinking into a mode of questioning of my place and identity. For me, place is an assumption of identity or a critical portraiture that can add distinction. Since I left my home, I

¹ Carl Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*, Published by New American Library, Pages 101-104

lost the sense of belonging and attaching myself to the land, and this loss was where I felt a void, emptiness, and unfamiliarity.

It was through such alienation that I began to create a new gaze toward my present time and space. By *force majeure*, my anthropocentric idea of place was replaced by the concept of space. That space was the projection of my undiscovered yet tangible self that I discovered. Within that new space, I found myself floating in an uncanny metaphysical realm. Therefore, through this non-physical place, I created my fantasized intangible world. Furthermore, it was through that replacement that I started to form a different, non-physical land in which I felt at home. This is the space I can never leave because it is not a physical location on earth with a geographical latitude and longitude. Instead, this space is a home within me, in which I deconstruct the reality and reconstruct the objects, forms, and figures in an interstitial space between construction and deconstruction.

I attempt to situate forms and figures by tapping into multi-layered spaces and ambiguous memories that require further analysis. All the forms and colours are the essence of my feelings towards my real and imaginary worlds. They are manifestations of my dreamlike universe, pregnant with the message of shifting and transformation.

Description of Program of Work

Artistic Practice During the MFA Program

My first painting, which was my first attempt to embody and depict this surreal universe, is called *Dasein*. Borrowing its title from Martin Heidegger's theory of Dasein in part one of *Being and Time*², Dasein is an ordinary German word that means "existence." Because only humans are capable of asking questions about existence, asking about human life, meaning "what does it mean to be human". Heidegger relates Dasein to the "place" of human beings, which we could understand as world.¹

In the *Dasein** painting (picture 1), there is a metaphorical, androgynous human figure descending into a body of water set against a deep, majestic boreal landscape. We can see a strong amalgam of nature; branches and roots collate a human body form. This magnificent-woven hybrid landscape represents the marginal spaces inhabited by bizarre identities — that is, those vital spaces between "here" and "there" that unsettle the restrictive binaries of heteronormative gender and sexuality. These spaces are the ambiguous yet obvious theme that has dominated in all of my works. Many of these works are illustrated self-portraits that depict my personal exploration towards my self, memories in the surreal-like spaces. The ambiguity that could be sensed in my paintings happens through juxtaposing realistic and representational forms and figures are appear in surreal landscapes and spaces. This dislocation brings us a sense of loss and longing. For the search of truth and meaning I illustrated myself in exclusion, uncertainty, mystery in an unknown territory. I paint between the dream and waking state, with a new visual language, I create something new, something fresh, something with an original perspective. Mainly, the first body of works focuses more on self-discovery of the identity and the self.

² This the only part of the book that he actually wrote and rest of the book is unfinished. This book written to provoke consideration over "question of the meaning of being". However, one might think that Dasein means humans. Dasein is what it's like to be human (to ask about beings and to have a "world" --- Dasein's preliminary meaning is In-der-Welt-Sein. To be in the world).



Picture 1, *Dasein*, Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 8 feet, 2013

In *Ambiguity* (picture 2), which was created during the first semester, we can clearly see the objectification of the self. My struggle after immigration and entering to a new land, comes with a loss of identity, and therefore led to discovering myself in a new environment. In the struggle to establish a new identity, I experienced a profound crisis, reflected in the disturbing painting of the *Ambiguity* self-portrait. In this painting there are three self-portraits overlaying each other to show a split-personality mental state. Floating heads with expressions of angst and horror, clawlike hands, skin transparencies and an attempt to scream which is covered by a hand. The portraits are thoroughly exposed, both physically and psychically. There is no background in this painting, the figures are standing alone in a dark blue background. To show overlapping self-portraits, I employed transparent layered directional marks. The backdrop is a collage of more monochromatic abstract shapes.



Picture 2, *Ambiguity*, Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 60, 2013

Over this period of time, I was influenced by the painterly skills of Alex Kanevsky, Karim Hamid, Egon Schiele, and, most importantly, Gerhard Richter. A German artist born in 1932, Richter originally trained as a realist painter but later developed more abstract, expressive, and minimal works (pictures 3, 4, 5). His distinctive methodology has always inspired me, either through subject matter or through his various techniques and skills. What is fascinating about his work is the powerful yet uneasy relationship between photography and painting; his imagery reflects or expresses reality truthfully, partially, or even conceptually. Reflecting on the relationship between photography and painting, Richter stated, "Photography altered ways of seeing and thinking. Photographs were regarded as true, paintings as artificial. The painted picture was no longer credible; its representation froze into immobility, because it was not authentic but invented." He employed various techniques and styles, such as blurring paintings from photographs of his family members or overlapping oil paints over photographs of his

family album to explore that how images seem to have life of their own. This movement of visual fusion, in which photography, projection, and painting merge to make a finished art work, suggests that all vision is a kind of conversion of the "real" into the "imaginary."



Picture 3, Alex Kanevsky ,*Bathing Nude*, Oil on canvas, 37.5 x 152.4 cm, 2012

Picture 4, Gerhard Richter, *Construction*, Oil on canvas, 1976



Picture 5, Karim Hamid, *Mustang Boss*(detail), Oil on canvas, presented at SCOPE courtesy of Aureus Contemporary, RI

In his ultimately abstract pieces, all of his personal emotions and distinctive narratives seem lost. However, many art critics and art historians translated his brushstrokes, forms, and scrapes of colour into both his worldview's meaning and his deepest connections to natural phenomena of being and existence. His abstraction appears as beautiful as flora and fauna, which came into existence both naturally and by way of unpredictable incident of pure chance and natural forceⁱⁱ (Picture 4).

Alternately, in the impressionistic “motion blurred” work of Russian painter, Alex Kanevsky’s, who was born in 1963, we witness emotionally triggering narratives that evoke direct sensations in audiences³. His process starts with sequential photography of models that are either involved in an action (i.e. bathing nude series, nudes in forest) or remain motionless and are then painted at each stage of movement. Finally, he successfully depicts the ephemeral and liveliness of human bodies that are involved in their everyday chores, giving the viewer an observer’s role that is lost in the dramatic translation of Kanevsky’s expression (picture 3).

The immediate influence of Kanevsky’s work is evident in *womb* (picture 6), in which I painted three self-portraits merged as one figure, floating in multiple layers of a space and time continuum. The multiple character resembles Shiva, a Hindu god, floating over a never-ending turquoise colour space that represents water-like-space. In Hinduism, Shiva is one of the five primary forms of gods regarded as a “Transformer,” but at his highest level, he is the creator, preserver, destroyer, revealer, and concealer of all that is. Shiva has been depicted with four or multiple hands, with each hand holding symbols of death and creation. Shiva is responsible for change and transformation, both in the form of death and destruction and in the positive sense of destroying the ego, or the false identification of the form. This deconstruction also means shedding habits and attachments. Only by breaking up the “visual language” can we feel and sense the aesthetic sensibility of the psyche. To create this break, odd brush marks expressively traverse the canvas and deconstruct the uniformity of figures to simulate the expansion.

In this painting, I distorted forms and figures into myriad human body shapes in an empty space. I tried to defragment their worldly presence into space as they are expanding in multiple layers of time from past, present, and future. The figures dance, intertwining with each other in a deep sleep as they dream about life, the world, and creation. The colors and forms vividly represent chaos but, simultaneously, a sense of calmness and serenity in an unknown place and space. They are dancing naked in their mother’s womb, which symbolizes the innocence and purity of their souls. Despite their lack of egos and personas, the figures are fully vulnerable and receptive to transformation. In this work, I attempt to depict my unconscious self, floating in space, waiting to awaken and to be born.

The subject of *Womb* was influenced by Carl Jung’s extensive analysis of psyche. Jung explains, “*By psyche I understand the totality of all psychic processes, conscious as well as*

³ Mark Godfery and Nicolas Serota, *Gerhard Richter; Panaroma*. 2012

unconscious,” that breaks the conventional analogy of brain, which is only limited to the conscious brain alone. *Psyche* is the Greek equivalent for *Anima* and the Latin word for *soul*. Both refer to something metaphysical—beyond the physical and invisible to our eyes.

The discovery of the psyche only happened through the realization of our thought and thinking system. Essentially, we start to think whenever we are facing physical or emotional distress, and then we situate ourselves in a particular time and space. In Jung’s theory, psyche is a self-regulating system. Unlike the body, it constantly tries to maintain a balance between the opposing qualities of itself while it striving for more growth and understanding of itself. This is a process Jung called “ Individuation,” which breaks the psyche into other essential complex components: the ego (central of the field of consciousness), the personal unconscious, complexes, the collective unconscious, the self, persona, the shadow, Anima and animus, and individuation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss about the details of all these components; however, it is important to understand individuation to be able to comprehend the intent of this work. For Jung, individuation was a longing for wholeness and growth. As our psyche undertakes this journey to become aware and conscious of itself in his or her own unique personality, the psyche aims to find oneness, rather more than less, with others. Jung referred to it as a collective conscious growth.ⁱⁱⁱ



Picture 6, *Womb*, Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 8 feet, 2014

Later, I shifted my focus towards personal identity and the inner self. Over this period, I returned to study both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung’s analytical psychology and theory of the undiscovered self. Freud, the father of psychology and psychoanalysis, created an innovative

theory of the mind, which analyzed unconscious process underlying thought, memory, sexuality, and behavior⁴. According to his theory of dreams, our dreams can be understood as the symbolic representation of the fulfillment of unconscious wishes or as our earlier processes or forms of thinking or memories.⁵ In his method of treatment, he believed dreams could provide perfect means to enter patients in the unconscious to undo repression and to understand their inner desires that remained unexpressed. Unlike Freud, Jung believed “dreams are impartial, spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche . . . that show us the unvarnished, natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature.”⁶ Thus, Jung argued that dreams are not deceptive but rather expressive and revealing.

The unconscious stands as the central pillar in psychoanalytic thought. Although Freud did not discover the unconscious, as many believe, he did bring our attention to its primacy in human life. The theories of both Jung and Freud highlight the discovery of the unconscious mind, as represented in a dream state that could be clearly active in a conscious experience. Significantly, both psychotherapists considered analysis of dreams as a key point of the creative process.⁷ When Jung further explains the creative process, one can easily discern his or her own creative process.⁸

Jung’s philosophy and cosmology had a deep impact on my art process. After understanding dream psychoanalysis, I carefully began to employ symbols, forms, and senses—all deeply layered in my unconscious memory—into my art work. Shortly after, I started a new piece *Mutual core* (picture 8) depicts possibilities of one’s characteristics at one single moment in time. Also translated as split personalities or multiple personalities, the phenomenon captures the existence of two or more distinct identities or personalities, each with its own pattern of perceiving and interacting with the environment, in a single individual.

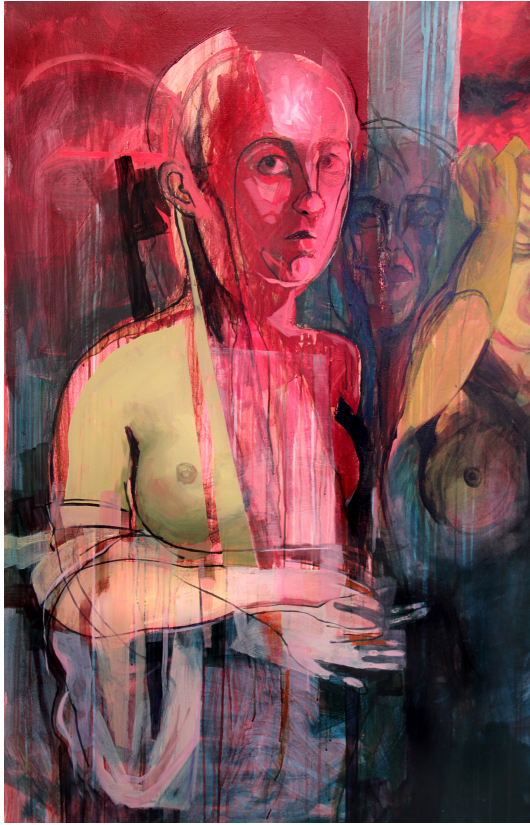
⁴ Bruce Hood, *The Self Illusion, How The Social Brain Creates Identity*. 2012, p.186

⁵ Danielle Knafo, *Dancing with the Unconscious, The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art*, p.44

⁶ Carl Jung, *The undiscovered self, The problem of the individual in modern society*. 1933/1964, p. 149

⁷ Danielle Knafo, *Dancing with the Unconscious, The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art*, p.48

⁸ Jung talks about the creative process: “*The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to our deepest springs of life*” 1922/1971, p.321



Picture 7, *Self-portrait* (detail), Acrylic on canvas, 2015

This phenomenon or disorder is repeated in different forms and levels of intensity in my works. The painting includes four nude female figures standing in a symmetric composition. Thus, the audience might think two of the figures are a mirror and reflection of the other two. However, each figure is holding a certain pose of reaching their hands towards the center of the canvas while standing in

front of an abstract background. Concurrently, there are two red pomegranate shapes below the center of the canvas. In ancient Greek mythology, pomegranates symbolize life and rebirth, particularly in the abduction story of Persephone by Hades, the god of the underworld. However, in ancient Persian culture, pomegranates were a symbol of fertility, love, and sexual desires.

In this painting the figures are in essence, types. Stylized, distorted, and caricaturized to the point of being more signifiers of personages than actual people, at times, they are absurd, and even ludicrous in appearance. They are more similar to goddesses and warriors—particularly the figure at the rear behind, who wears a peculiar mask, and the other figure at front with a red face—than to fashion models. To a great length, the figures and forms went through a variety of cuts, pastes, squeezes, and painterly dissembling. As a whole, there is a complicated and mysterious essence in the construction of the painting. The figures can seem both mind-boggling and also very specific. One might see the figures as witches, shaman or even like clowns, as the figures can appear dreamy, stylized, defiant, frightened, and aloof. Moreover, this painting might reawaken cubist notions, not only of the representation of physical movement in space, but also

of physical perceptions in the mind's eye. Their bodies are both tangible and intangible, carrying different personal meanings and identities, while offering a representation of self-perception that blends the physical form into a metaphysical landscape.



Picture 8, *Mutual Core*, Acrylic on canvas, 6 x 6 feet, 2015

Over the last year of my master's program, I worked on several small portraits. The first portraits were of close friends that I felt a deep connection with. Primarily studies of gestures, the works were created with various techniques and color pallets in a multi-step process of representation. The composition of these pieces allowed me to explore more positive space mark making, drawing, and paint application. Following my usual preliminary steps, I developed an underlying drawing then glazed outer layers of colour but left large sections of the underpainting as finished areas. Two of the portraits were later exhibited in the MFA exchange show with the University of Lethbridge in January of 2016 (Picture 9). The second portrait was an abstract self-portrait. To create this work, I used an architectural photo to develop the underlying painting and then employed the geometrical forms as a new pattern to serve as sections of the face. The ratio, composition, and simple subject matter of these smaller works allowed for more experimentation with abstraction.



Picture 9, *Georgia*, Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 76 cm, 2015

In the second term, I worked from images taken from an earlier photoshoot of myself in winter landscape, which included a series of collaged images. For the first large painting of the term, I chose an image that included multiple bodies in the formation of one superimposed body against a simple, winter landscape. I inverted the natural warm skin tones into cold, icy blue colors and then cut and reassembled the body formation. By employing this procedure, I distorted forms and figures into myriad human body shapes in surreal spaces, and their worldly figures defragmented into a frozen time and space. (picture 10)



Picture 10, *Pagan Poetry*, Digital photo, 2015,16

There is a sense of timelessness in the *Pagan Poetry* image that invites the viewer to have a greater look, gazing into the body and the landscape. One might see the intertwined figures resembling a tornado or some other natural

force. The distorted and tangled bodies, which happens through obscuring the human forms, signify my confusion towards my life's surroundings. All forms, lights, and colours of the spaces are prone to abrupt nonlinearities because of underlying chaos and lack of uniformity. Here, the nudity does not direct the viewer to sexuality but, rather, leads them to comprehend the meaning of the abstraction and the juxtaposition of the body in the landscape. By implementing portraits into the sky, I intend to mirror the absurdity and abstraction of the figure. An absurdity of the body and form is a compelling and uncompromising self-portrait, which engages and disengages with the world.

Convention suggests that a portrait is an image of someone, as opposed to something or nothing. In fact, when looking at the picture, there is a sense of vague implication that we are tacitly acknowledging a soul or a self of someone. Furthermore, colour schemes are unisolated and inconstant, and tonal variations are pronounced in several layers parallel to the forms. This distortion brings a feeling of discomfort that is further exaggerated through the use of vibrant colours that echo complex emotional states, like the fear of exploring the unknown. Essentially, the work is pieced together by bits of what were once images of the body, squeezed through the objectifying lens of self-criticism, and glued back together with a sheer force of paint to reconstruct a myriad of human bodies. Here, paint is the messy glue that binds an assemblage of meaningless chaotic parts into a viable whole. These mashup figures have their own degree of autonomy from the creator's hand, as they are expressionistic extensions of my psyche and, simultaneously, independent humanoids.

My last large painting presents a full nude self-portrait in a winter landscape. Although abstracted, the figure is whole and holds a sheet or cloak above her head, willingly exposing and unveiling her body in the cold landscape. We can also see the trees and landscape on the cloak. The nude body holding an invisible cloak, a duplication of the cloak in *Harry Potter*⁹'s fantasy novel. The invisibility coat is a magical garment which renders whoever covers it unseeable. According to The Tale of Three Brothers, a wizarding legend, a Cloak of Invisibility is one which "endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it."

⁹ Harry Potter is a fantasy novel by J.K Rowling. The novel is about a young wizard Harry who is attending a wizard school. In the novel *Harry Potter*'s father, James Potter, gave Harry an invisibility cloak as a gift on Christmas day 1991 that he inherited from his father. *Invisibility Cloak*, Web, Harrypotter.Wikia.com.

Simultaneously, however, this painting could be a depiction of shedding skin and transformation. This transformation could happen in one cycle of life and also in a higher level through rebirth into a different or a higher form. The most famous story of reincarnation is of Krishna, who is one of the most powerful incarnations of Vishnu, the Godhead of the Hindu Trinity of deities. Krishna, a god of the gods, is a supreme being and a divine hero. In ancient Indian mysticism and iconography, he is easily recognized by his representations. In past representations, his skin color may be depicted as black or dark, but in modern representations, he is shown in blue skin.

The self-portrait under the invisibility cloak, presented in front of a snowed forest with highly rendered brush marks, remained realistic to the photograph. In contrast, the background forest scene is primitive and abstract with quick drawings of branches and trees. In some parts, we can see the white canvas, which magnifies the cold and silent atmosphere of prairie. In this painting, I used abstraction to redirect the viewer from a sexual interpretation to the body as metaphor. Representing both beauty and danger, the majestic force of nature invites the ultimate affirmation of and escape from the self into the brotherhood of courage and transformation.

Conclusion

In the final analysis it could be said that our self is the product of our mind, as the brain develops, so does the self. But how and why did we evolve the self illusion will always remain as a mystery to humanity. But when we look at the mirror, we see the outward appearance of our self but we believe that the image is simply the outer shell of the body we occupy. As discussed earlier in this paper the understanding of our being and the awareness of our self originated in our own thoughts and actions. On the other side it was through discovery of art as a tool we become aware of our ability to create language and signs, to communicate our beliefs and understanding of our existence. Thus in my art, I employed self-representational art as a common form of self-illusion or rather self-knowledge. In my self-portraits I represented and illustrated my physical body floating in unknown surreal self-created landscapes. My physical appearance and my body comes with an inner space –the womb- the biological foundation for creation. As Daniel Knafo put it eloquently: “The womb has its correlate in female experiences having space

within for birth, both literal and figurative, a kinesthetic connection with a pulsing interiority rich with creative possibilities”^{iv}. My self-portraits reveal a psychology of looking and of being looked at, and of representation itself in an unknown territories and landscapes.

Endnotes

ⁱ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time; A translation of Sein Unt Zeit*, Translated by Joan Stambaugh, (State University of New York Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱ Mark Godfrey and Nicholas Serota, *Gerhard Richter, Panaroma*. D.A.P/ Distributed Art Publishers Inc, (Tate Modern, London May, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Carl.G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self*. Translated from the German by R.F.C Hull, (Published by The New American Library).

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel Knafo, *Dancing with the Unconscious; The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art*, Psychoanalysis in a New Key Book Series, Volume 14, (Taylor and Francis, New York, 2012).

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